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The Man Who Stole a Meeting-House

By
J. T. Trowbridge

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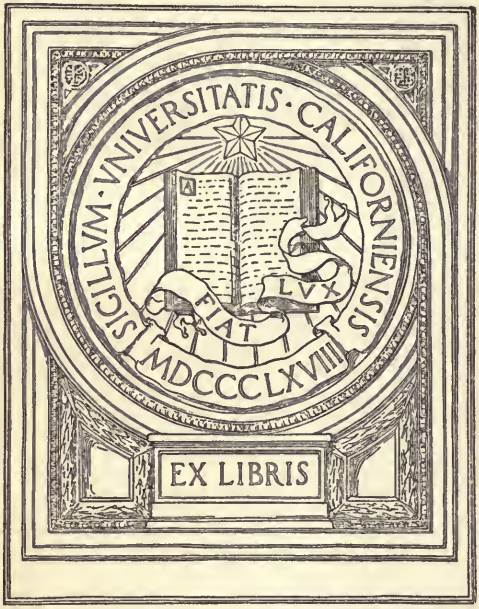

THE MAN WHO STOLE A MEETING-HOUSE

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BY J. T. TROWBRIDGE

John Townsend Trowbridge (born in Ogden, N. Y., in 1827) began his literary career in 1857 with a realistic novel of New England life entitled "Neighbor Jackwood." During the Civil War he wrote several stories dealing with that great event, such as "The Drummer Boy" and "Cudjo's Cave." Popular as these were, he will be remembered chiefly for his subsequent work in juvenile fiction, of which "The Jack Hazard Series" is a type. He has published seven volumes of verse, beginning with "The Vagabonds and Other Poems" (1869), and ending with a complete edition of his poems (1903); and an autobiography, "My Own Story" (1903). He has written many short stories of which in homely theme, direct narrative style, and plain moral purpose the present selection is thoroughly representative.

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THE MAN WHO STOLE A MEETING-HOUSE

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ON a recent journey to the Pennsylvania oil regions, I stopped one evening with a fellow-traveler at a village which had just been thrown into a turmoil of excitement by the exploits of a horse-thief. As we sat around the tavern hearth, after supper, we heard the particulars of the rogue's capture and escape fully discussed; then followed many another tale of theft and robbery, told amid curling puffs of tobacco-smoke; until, at the close of an exciting story, one of the natives turned to my traveling acquaintance, and, with a broad laugh, said, "Kin ye beat that, stranger?"

"Well, I don't know—maybe I could if I should try. I never happened to fall in with any such tall horse-stealing as you tell of, but I knew a man who stole a meeting-house once."

"Stole a meetin'-house! That goes a little beyant anything yit," remarked another of the honest villagers. "Ye don't mean he stole it and carried it away?"

"Stole it and carried it away," repeated my traveling companion, seriously, crossing his legs, and resting his arm on the back of his chair. "And, more than all that, I helped him."

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"How happened that?—for you don't look much like a thief yourself."

All eyes were now turned upon my friend, a plain New England farmer, whose honest homespun appearance and candid speech commanded respect.

"I was his hired man, and I acted under orders. His name was Jedwort—Old Jedwort, the boys called him, although he wasn't above fifty when the crooked little circumstance happened which I'll make as straight a story of as I can, if the company would like to hear it."

"Sartin, stranger! sartin! about stealin' the meetin'-house!" chimed in two or three voices.

My friend cleared his throat, put his hair behind his ears, and with a grave, smooth face, but with a merry twinkle in his shrewd gray eye, began as follows:

"Jedwort I said his name was; and I shall never forget how he looked one particular morning. He stood leaning on the front gate—or rather on the post, for the gate itself was such a shackling concern a child couldn't have leaned on't without breaking it down. And Jedwort was no child. Think of a stoutish, stooping, duck-legged man, with a mountainous back, strongly suggestive of a bag of grist under his shirt, and you have him. That imaginary grist had been growing heavier and heavier, and he more and more bent under it, for the last fifteen years and more, until his head and neck just came forward out from between his shoulders like a turtle's from its shell. His arms hung, as he walked, almost to the ground. Being curved with the elbows outward, he looked for all the world, in a front view, like a waddling interro-

gation-point inclosed in a parenthesis. If man was ever a quadruped, as I've heard some folks tell, and rose gradually from four legs to two, there must have been a time, very early in his history, when he went about like Old Jedwort.

"The gate had been a very good gate in its day. It had even been a genteel gate when Jedwort came into possession of the place by marrying his wife, who inherited it from her uncle. That was some twenty years before, and everything had been going to rack and ruin ever since.

"Jedwort himself had been going to rack and ruin, morally speaking. He was a middling decent sort of man when I first knew him; and I judge there must have been something about him more than common, or he never could have got such a wife. But then women do marry, sometimes, unaccountably. I've known downright ugly and disagreeable fellows to work around, till by and by they would get a pretty girl fascinated by something in them which nobody else could see, and then marry her in spite of everything;—just as you may have seen a magnetizer on the stage make his subjects do just what he pleased, or a black snake charm a bird. Talk about women marrying with their eyes open, under such circumstances! They don't marry with their eyes open: they are put to sleep, in one sense, and a'n't more than half responsible for what they do, if they are that. Then rises the question that has puzzled wiser heads than any of ours here, and will puzzle more yet, till society is different from what it is now—how much a refined

and sensitive woman is bound to suffer from a coarse and disgusting master, legally called her husband, before she is entitled to break off a bad bargain she scarce had a hand in making. I've sat here to-night and heard about men getting goods under false pretences; you've told some astonishing big stories, gentlemen, about rogues stealing horses and sleighs; and I'm going to tell you about the man who stole a meeting-house; but, when all is said, I guess it will be found that more extraordinary thieving than all that often goes on under our own eyes, and nobody takes any notice of it. There's such a thing, gentlemen, as getting hearts under false pretences. There's such a thing as a man's stealing a wife.

"I speak with feeling on this subject, for I had an opportunity of seeing what Mrs. Jedwort had to put up with from a man no woman of her stamp could do anything but detest. She was the patientest creature you ever saw. She was even too patient. If I had been tied to such a cub, I think I should have cultivated the beautiful and benignant qualities of a wild-cat; there would have been one good fight, and one of us would have been living, and the other would have been dead, and that would have been the end of it. But Mrs. Jedwort bore and bore untold miseries and a large number of children. She had had nine of these, and three were under the sod and six above it when Jedwort ran off with the meeting-house in the way I am going on to tell you. There was Maria, the oldest girl, a perfect picture of what her mother had been at nineteen. Then there were the two boys, Dave and

Dan, fine young fellows, spite of their father. Then came Lottie, and Susie, and then Willie, a little four-year-old.

"It was amazing to see what the mother would do to keep her family looking decent with the little means she had. For Jedwort was the tightest screw ever you saw. It was avarice that had spoiled him, and came so near turning him into a beast. The boys used to say he grew so bent looking in the dirt for pennies. That was true of his mind, if not of his body. He was a poor man, and a pretty respectable man, when he married his wife; but he had no sooner come into possession of a little property than he grew crazy for more. There are a good many men in the world, that nobody looks upon as monomaniacs, who are crazy in just that sort of way. They are all for laying up money, depriving themselves of comforts, and their families of the advantages of society and education, just to add a few dollars to their hoard every year; and so they keep on till they die and leave it to their children, who would be much better off if a little more had been invested in the cultivation of their minds and manners, and less in stocks and bonds.

"Jedwort was just one of that class of men, although perhaps he carried the fault I speak of a little to excess. A dollar looked so big to him, and he held it so close, that at last he couldn't see much of anything else. By degrees he lost all regard for decency and his neighbor's opinions. His children went barefoot, even after they got to be great boys and girls,

because he was too mean to buy them shoes. It was pitiful to see a nice, interesting girl, like Maria, go about looking as she did, while her father was piling his money into the bank. She wanted to go to school and learn music, and be somebody; but he wouldn't keep a hired girl, and so she was obliged to stay at home and do housework; and she could no more have got a dollar out of him to pay for clothes and tuition than you could squeeze sap out of a hoe-handle.

"The only way his wife could ever get anything new for the family was by stealing butter from her own dairy, and selling it behind his back. 'You needn't say anything to Mr. Jedwort about this batch of butter,' she would hint to the storekeeper; 'but you may hand the money to me, or I will take my pay in goods.' In this way a new gown, or a piece of cloth for the boys' coats, or something else the family needed, would be smuggled into the house, with fear and trembling lest old Jedwort should make a row and find where the money came from.

"The house inside was kept neat as a pin; but everything around it looked terribly shiftless. It was built originally in an ambitious style, and painted white. It had four tall front pillars, supporting the portion of the roof that came over the porch—lifting up the eyebrows of the house, if I may so express myself, and making it look as if it was going to sneeze. Half the blinds were off their hinges, and the rest flapped in the wind. The front doorstep had rotted away. The porch had once a good floor, but for years Jedwort had been in the habit of going to it

whenever he wanted a board for the pig-pen, until not a bit of floor was left.

"But I began to tell about Jedwort leaning on the gate that morning. We had all noticed him; and as Dave and I brought in the milk, his mother asked, 'What is your father planning now? Half the time he stands there, looking up the road; or else he's walking up that way in a brown study.'

" 'He's got his eye on the old meeting-house,' says Dave, setting down his pail. 'He has been watching it and walking round it, off and on, for a week.'

"That was the first intimation I had of what the old fellow was up to. But after breakfast he followed me out of the house, as if he had something on his mind to say to me.

" 'Stark,' says he, at last, 'you've always insisted on't that I wasn't an enterprisin' man.'

" 'I insist on't still,' says I; for I was in the habit of talking mighty plain to him, and joking him pretty hard sometimes. 'If I had this farm, I'd show you enterprise. You wouldn't see the hogs in the garden half the time, just for want of a good fence to keep 'em out. You wouldn't see the very best strip of land lying waste, just for want of a ditch. You wouldn't see that stone wall by the road tumbling down year after year, till by and by you won't be able to see it for the weeds and thistles.'

" 'Yes,' says he, sarcastically, 'ye'd lay out ten times as much money on the place as ye'd ever git back agin, I've no doubt. But I believe in economy.'

"That provoked me a little, and I said, 'Economy!

You're one of the kind of men that'll skin a flint for sixpence and spoil a jack-knife worth a shilling. You waste fodder and grain enough every three years to pay for a bigger barn—to say nothing of the inconvenience.'

" 'Wal, Stark,' says he, grinning and scratching his head, 'I've made up my mind to have a bigger barn, if I have to steal one.'

" 'That won't be the first thing you've stole, neither,' says I.

"He flared up at that. 'Stole?' says he. 'What did I ever steal?'

" 'Well, for one thing, the rails the freshet last spring drifted off from Talcott's land onto yours, and you grabbed: what was that but stealing?'

" 'That was luck. He couldn't swear to his rails. By the way, they'll jest come in play now.'

" 'They've come in play already,' says I. 'They've gone on to the old fences all over the farm, and I could use a thousand more without making much show.'

" 'That's 'cause you're so dumbed extravagant with rails, as you are with everything else. A few loads can be spared from the fences here and there, as well as not. Harness up the team, boys, and git together enough to make about ten rods o' zigzag, two rails high.'

" 'Two rails?' says Dave, who had a healthy contempt for the old man's narrow, contracted way of doing things. 'What's the good of such a fence as that?'

"'It'll be,' says I, 'like the single bar in music. When our old singing master asked his class once what a single bar was, Bill Wilkins spoke up and said, "It's a bar that horses and cattle jump over, and pigs and sheep run under." What do you expect to keep out with two rails?'

"'The *law,* boys, the *law,*' says Jedwort. 'I know what I'm about. I'll make a fence the *law* can't run under nor jump over; and I don't care a cuss for the cattle and pigs. You git the rails, and I'll rip some boards off'n the pig-pen to make stakes.'

"'Boards a'n't good for nothin' for stakes,' says Dave. 'Besides, none can't be spared from the pig-pen.'

"'I'll have boards enough in a day or two for forty pig-pens,' says Jedwort. 'Bring along the rails and dump 'em out in the road for the present, and say nothin' to nobody.'

"We got the rails, and he made his stakes; and right away after dinner he called us out. 'Come, boys,' says he, 'now we'll astonish the natives.'

"The wagon stood in the road, with the last jag of rails still on it. Jedwort piled on his stakes, and threw on the crowbar and axe, while we were hitching up the team.

"'Now, drive on, Stark,' says he.

"'Yes; but where shall I drive to?'

"'To the old meetin'-house,' says Jedwort, trudging on ahead.

"The old meeting-house stood on an open common,

at the northeast corner of his farm. A couple of cross-roads bounded it on two sides; and it was bounded on the other two by Jedwort's overgrown stone wall. It was a square, old-fashioned building, with a low steeple, that had a belfry, but no bell in it, and with a high, square pulpit and high, straight-backed pews inside. It was now some time since meetings had been held there; the old society that used to meet there having separated, one division of it building a fashionable chapel in the North Village, and the other a fine new church at the Centre.

"Now, the peculiarity about the old church property was, that nobody had any legal title to it. A log meeting-house had been built there when the country was first settled and the land was of no account. In the course of time that was torn down, and a good frame house put up in its place. As it belonged to the whole community, no title, either to the house or land, was ever recorded; and it wasn't until after the society dissolved that the question came up as to how the property was to be disposed of. While the old deacons were carefully thinking it over, Jedwort was on hand, to settle it by putting in his claim.

" 'Now, boys,' says he, 'ye see what I'm up to.'

" 'Yes,' says I, provoked as I could be at the mean trick, 'and I knew it was some such mischief all along. You never show any enterprise, as you call it, unless it is to get the start of a neighbor. Then you are wide awake; then you are busy as the Devil in a gale of wind.'

"'But what *are* you up to, pa?' says Dan, who didn't see the trick yet.

"The old man says, 'I'm goin' to fence in the rest part of my farm.'

"'What rest part?'

"'This part that never was fenced; the old meetin'-house common.'

"'But, pa,' says Dave, disgusted as I was, 'you've no claim on that.'

"'Wal, if I ha'n't, I'll make a claim. Give me the crowbar. Now, here's the corner, nigh as I can squint'; and he stuck the bar into the ground. 'Make a fence to here from the wall, both sides.'

"'Sho, pa!' says Dan, looking bewildered; 'ye a'n't goin' to fence in the old meetin'-house, be ye?'

"'That's jest what I'm goin' to do. Go and git some big stuns from the wall—the biggest ye can find, to rest the corners of the fence on. String the rails along by the road, Stark, and go for another load. Don't stand gawpin' there!'

"'*Gawpin'?*' says I; 'it's enough to make anybody *gawp*. You do beat all the critters I ever had to deal with. Haven't ye disgraced your family enough already, without stealing a meeting-house?'

"'How have I disgraced my family?' says he.

"Then I put it to him. 'Look at your children; it's all your wife can do to prevent 'em from growing up in rags and dirt and ignorance, because you are too close-fisted to clothe 'em decently or send 'em to school. Look at your house and yard. To see an Irishman's shanty in such a condition seems appro-

priate enough, but a genteel place, a house with pillars, run down and gone to seed like that, is an eyesore to the community. Then look at your wife. You never would have had any property to mismanage if it hadn't been for her; and see the way you show your gratitude for it. You won't let her go into company, nor have company at home; you won't allow a hired girl in the house, but she and Maria have to do all the drudgery. You make perfect slaves of 'em. I swear, if it wa'n't for your wife, I wouldn't work for you an hour longer; but she's the best woman in the world, after all you've done to break her spirit, and I hate to leave her.'

"The old fellow squirmed, and wrenched the crowbar in the ground, then snarled back: 'Yes! you're waitin' for me to die; then you mean to step into my shoes.'

"'I hope you'll have a decenter pair than them you've got on, if I'm to step into 'em,' says I.

"'One thing about it,' says he, 'she won't have ye.'

"'I should think,' says I, 'a woman that would marry you would have 'most anybody.'

"So we had it back and forth, till by and by he left me to throw off the rails, and went to show the boys how to build the fence.

"'Look here,' says he; 'jest put a thunderin' big stun to each corner; then lay your rail on; then drive your pair of stakes over it like a letter X.' He drove a pair. 'Now put on your rider. There's your letter X, ridin' one length of rails and carryin' another. That's what I call puttin' yer alphabet to a practical

use; and I say there a'n't no sense in havin' any more edication than ye *can* put to a practical use. I've larnin' enough to git along in the world; and if my boys have as much as I've got, they'll git along. Now work spry, for there comes Deacon Talcott.'

"'Wal, wal!' says the Deacon, coming up, puffing with excitement; 'what ye doin' to the old meetin'-house?'

"'Wal,' says Jedwort, driving away at his stakes, and never looking up, 'I've been considerin' some time what I should do with't, and I've concluded to make a barn on't.'

"'Make a barn! make a barn!' cries the Deacon. 'Who give ye liberty to make a barn of the house of God?'

"'Nobody; I take the liberty. Why shouldn't I do what I please with my own prop'ty?'

"'Your own property—what do you mean? 'Ta'n't your meetin'-house.'

"'Whose is't, if 'ta'n't mine?' says Jedwort, lifting his turtle's head from between his horizontal shoulders, and grinning in the Deacon's face.

"'It belongs to the society,' says the Deacon.

"'But the s'ciety's pulled up stakes and gone off.'

"'It belongs to individooals of the society—to individooals.'

"'Wal, I'm an individooal,' says Jedwort.

"'You! you never went to meetin' here a dozen times in your life!'

"'I never did have my share of the old meetin'-

house, that's a fact,' says Jedwort; 'but I'll make it up now.'

"'But what are ye fencin' up the common for?' says the Deacon.

"'It'll make a good calf-pastur'. I've never had my share o' the vally o' that, either. I've let my neighbors' pigs and critters run on't long enough; and now I'm jest goin' to take possession o' my own.'

"'Your own!' says the Deacon, in perfect consternation. 'You've no deed on't.'

"'Wal, have you?'

"'No—but—the society—'

"'The s'ciety, I tell ye,' says Jedwort, holding his head up longer than I ever knew him to hold it up at a time and grinning all the while in Talcott's face—'the s'ciety is split to pieces. There a'n't no s'ciety now—any more'n a pig's a pig arter you've butchered and e't it. You've e't the pig amongst ye, and left me the pen. The s'ciety never had a deed o' this 'ere prop'ty; and no man never had a deed o' this 'ere prop'ty. My wife's gran'daddy, when he took up the land here, was a good-natered sort of man, and he allowed a corner on't for his neighbors to put up a temp'rary meetin'-house. That was finally used up—the kind o' preachin' they had them days was enough to use up in a little time any house that wa'n't fire-proof; and when that was preached to pieces, they put up another shelter in its place. This is it. And now't the land a'n't used no more for the puppose 'twas lent for, it goes back nat'rally to the

estate 'twas took from, and the buildin's along with it.'

"'That's all a sheer fabrication,' says the Deacon. 'This land was never a part of what's now your farm, any more than it was a part of mine.'

"'Wal,' says Jedwort, 'I look at it in my way, and you've a perfect right to look at it in your way. But I'm goin' to make sure o' my way, by puttin' a fence round the hull concern.'

"'And you're usin' some of my rails for to do it with!' says the Deacon.

"'Can you swear they're your rails?'

"'Yes, I can; they're the rails the freshet carried off from my farm last spring, and landed on to yourn.'

"'So I've heard ye say. But can you swear to the partic'lar rails? Can you swear, for instance, 't this 'ere is your rail? or this 'ere one?'

"'No; I can't swear to precisely them two—but—'

"'Can you swear to these two? or to any one or two?' says Jedwort. No, ye can't. Ye can swear to the lot in general, but you can't swear to any partic'lar rail, and that kind o' swearin' won't stand law, Deacon Talcott. I don't boast of bein' an edicated man, but I know suthin' o' what law is, and when I know it, I dror a line there, and I toe that line, and I make my neighbors toe that line, Deacon Talcott. Nine p'ints of the law is possession, and I'll have possession o' this 'ere house and land by fencin' on't in; and though every man 't comes along should say these

'ere rails belong to them, I'll fence it in with these 'ere very rails.'

"Jedwort said this, wagging his obstinate old head, and grinning with his face turned up pugnaciously at the Deacon; then went to work again as if he had settled the question, and didn't wish to discuss it any further.

"As for Talcott, he was too full of wrath and boiling indignation to answer such a speech. He knew that Jedwort had managed to get the start of him with regard to the rails, by mixing a few of his own with those he had stolen, so that nobody could tell 'em apart; and he saw at once that the meeting-house was in danger of going the same way, just for want of an owner to swear out a clear title to the property. He did just the wisest thing when he swallowed his vexation, and hurried off to alarm the leading men of the two societies, and to consult a lawyer.

" 'He'll stir up the old town like a bumble-bee's nest,' says Jedwort. 'Hurry up, boys, or there'll be a buzzin' round our ears 'fore we git through!'

" 'I wish ye wouldn't, pa!' says Dave. 'Why don't we 'tend to our own business, and be decent, like other folks? I'm sick of this kind of life.'

" 'Quit it, then,' says Jedwort.

" 'Do you tell me to quit it?' says Dave, dropping the end of a rail he was handling.

" 'Yes, I do; and do it dumbed quick, if ye can't show a proper respect to your father!'

"Dave turned white as a sheet, and he trembled as he answered back, 'I should be glad to show you re-

spect, if you was a man I could feel any respect for.'

"At that Jedwort caught hold of the iron bar that was sticking in the ground, where he had been making a hole for a stake, and pulled away at it. 'I'll make a stake-hole in you!' says he. 'It's enough to have a sassy hired man round, without bein' jawed by one's own children!'

"Dave was out of reach by the time the bar came out of the ground.

" 'Come here, you villain!' says the old man.

" 'I'd rather be excused,' says Dave, backing off. 'I don't want any stake-holes made in me to-day. You told me to quit, and I'm going to. You may steal your own meeting-houses in future; I won't help.'

"There was a short race. Dave's young legs proved altogether too smart for the old waddler's, and he got off. Then Jedwort, coming back, wheezing and sweating, with his iron bar, turned savagely on me.

" 'I've a good notion to tell you to go too!'

" 'Very well, why don't ye?' says I. 'I'm ready.'

" 'There's no livin' with ye, ye're gettin' so dumbed sassy! What I keep ye for is a mystery to me.'

" 'No, it a'n't; you keep me because you can't get another man to fill my place. You put up with my sass for the money I bring ye in.'

" 'Hold your yawp,' says he, 'and go and git another load of rails. If ye see Dave, tell him to come back to work.'

"I did see Dave, but, instead of telling him to go

back, I advised him to put out from the old home and get his living somewhere else. His mother and Maria agreed with me; and when the old man came home that night Dave was gone.

"When I got back with my second load, I found the neighbors assembling to witness the stealing of the old meeting-house, and Jedwort was answering their remonstrances.

"'A meetin'-house is a respectable kind o' prop'ty to have round,' says he. 'The steeple'll make a good show behind my house. When folks ride by, they'll stop and look, and say, "There's a man keeps a private meetin'-house of his own." I can have preachin' in't, too, if I want. I'm able to hire a preacher of my own, or I can preach myself and save the expense.'

"Of course, neither sarcasm nor argument could have any effect on such a man. As the neighbors were going away, Jedwort shouted after 'em: 'Call agin. Glad to see ye. There'll be more sport in a few days, when I take the dumbed thing away.' (The dumbed thing was the meeting-house.) 'I invite ye all to see the show. Free gratis. It'll be good as a circus, and a 'tarnal sight cheaper. The women can bring their knittin', and the gals their everlastin' tattin'. As it'll be a pious kind o' show, bein' it's a meetin'-house, guess I'll have notices gi'n out from the pulpits the Sunday afore.'

"The common was fenced in by sundown; and the next day Jedwort had over a house-mover from the North Village to look and see what could be done

with the building. 'Can ye snake it over, and drop it back of my house?' says he.

"It'll be a hard job,' says old Bob, 'without you tear down the steeple fust.'

"But Jedwort said, 'What's a meetin'-house 'thout a steeple? I've got my heart kind o' set on that steeple, and I'm bound to go the hull hog on this 'ere concern, now I've begun.'

" 'I vow,' says Bob, examining the timbers, 'I won't warrant but the old thing'll all tumble down.'

" 'I'll resk it.'

" 'Yes; but who'll resk the lives of me and my men?'

" 'O, you'll see if it's re'ly goin' to tumble, and look out. I'll engage 't me and my boys'll do the most dangerous part of the work. Dumbed if I wouldn't agree to ride in the steeple and ring the bell if there was one.'

"I've never heard that the promised notices were read from the pulpits; but it wasn't many days before Bob came over again, bringing with him this time his screws and ropes and rollers, his men and timbers, horse and capstan; and at last the old house might have been seen on its travels.

"It was an exciting time all around. The societies found that Jedwort's fence gave him the first claim to house and land unless a regular siege of the law was gone through to beat him off—and then it might turn out that he would beat them. Some said fight him; some said let him be—the thing a'n't worth going to law for; and so, as the leading men couldn't agree as to what should be done, nothing was done. That

was just what Jedwort had expected, and he laughed in his sleeve while Bob and his boys screwed up the old meeting-house, and got their beams under it, and set it on rollers, and slued it around, and slid it on the timbers laid for it across into Jedwort's field, steeple foremost, like a locomotive on a track.

"It was a trying time for the women folks at home. Maria had declared that, if her father did persist in stealing the meeting-house, she would not stay a single day after it, but would follow Dave.

"That touched me pretty close, for, to tell the truth, it was rather more Maria than her mother that kept me at work for the old man. 'If you go,' says I, 'then there is no object for me to stay; I shall go too.'

" 'That's what I supposed,' says she; 'for there's no reason in the world why you should stay. But then Dan will go; and who'll be left to take sides with mother? That's what troubles me. Oh, if she could only go too! But she won't; and she couldn't if she would, with the other children depending on her. Dear, dear! what shall we do?'

"The poor girl put her head on my shoulder, and cried; and if I should own up to the truth, I suppose I cried a little too. For where's the man that can hold a sweet woman's head on his shoulder, while she sobs out her trouble, and he hasn't any power to help her —who, I say, can do any less, under such circumstances, than drop a tear or two for company?

" 'Never mind; don't hurry,' says Mrs. Jedwort. 'Be patient, and wait awhile, and it'll all turn out right, I'm sure.'

"'Yes, you always say, "Be patient, and wait!"' says Maria, brushing back her hair. 'But, for my part, I'm tired of waiting, and my patience has given out long ago. We can't always live in this way, and we may as well make a change now as ever. But I can't bear the thought of going and leaving you.'

"Here the two younger girls came in; and, seeing that crying was the order of the day, they began to cry; and when they heard Maria talk of going, they declared they would go; and even little Willie, the four-year-old, began to howl.

"'There, there! Maria! Lottie! Susie!' said Mrs. Jedwort, in her calm way; 'Willie, hush up! I don't know what we are to do; but I feel that something is going to happen that will show us the right way, and we are to wait. Now go and wash the dishes, and set the cheese.'

"That was just after breakfast, the second day of the moving; and sure enough, something like what she prophesied did happen before another sun.

"The old frame held together pretty well till along toward night, when the steeple showed signs of seceding. 'There she goes! She's falling now!' sung out the boys, who had been hanging around all day in hopes of seeing the thing tumble.

"The house was then within a few rods of where Jedwort wanted it; but Bob stopped right there, and said it wasn't safe to haul it another inch. 'That steeple's bound to come down, if we do,' says he.

"'Not by a dumbed sight, it a'n't,' says Jedwort. 'Them cracks a'n't nothin'; the j'ints is all firm yit.'

He wanted Bob to go up and examine; but Bob shook his head—the concern looked too shaky. Then he told me to go up; but I said I hadn't lived quite long enough, and had a little rather be smoking my pipe on *terra firma*. Then the boys began to hoot. 'Dumbed if ye a'n't all a set of cowards,' says he. 'I'll go up myself.'

"We waited outside while he climbed up inside. The boys jumped on the ground to jar the steeple, and make it fall. One of them blew a horn—as he said, to bring down the old Jericho—and another thought he'd help things along by starting up the horse, and giving the building a little wrench. But Bob put a stop to that; and finally out came a head from the belfry window. It was Jedwort, who shouted down to us: 'There ain't a j'int or brace gi'n out. Start the hoss, and I'll ride. Pass me up that 'ere horn, and—'

"Just then there came a cracking and loosening of timbers; and we that stood nearest had only time to jump out of the way, when down came the steeple crashing to the ground, with Jedwort in it."

"I hope it killed the cuss," said one of the village story-tellers.

"Worse than that," replied my friend; "it just cracked his skull—not enough to put an end to his miserable life, but only to take away what little sense he had. We got the doctors to him, and they patched up his broken head; and, by George, it made me mad to see the fuss the women folks made over him. It would have been my way to let him die; but they were as anxious and attentive to him as if he had been the

kindest husband and most indulgent father that ever lived; for that's women's style: they're unreasoning creatures.

"Along toward morning, we persuaded Mrs. Jedwort, who had been up all night, to lie down a spell and catch a little rest, while Maria and I sat up and watched with the old man. All was still except our whispers and his heavy breathing; there was a lamp burning in the next room; when all of a sudden a light shone into the windows, and about the same time we heard a roaring and crackling sound. We looked out, and saw the night all lighted up, as if by some great fire. As it appeared to be on the other side of the house, we ran to the door, and there what did we see but the old meeting-house all in flames! Some fellows had set fire to it to spite Jedwort. It must have been burning some time inside; for when we looked out the flames had burst through the roof.

"As the night was perfectly still, except a light wind blowing away from the other buildings on the place, we raised no alarm, but just stood in the door and saw it burn. And a glad sight it was to us, you may be sure. I just held Maria close to my side, and told her that all was well—it was the best thing that could happen. 'O yes,' says she, 'it seems to me as though a kind Providence was burning up his sin and shame out of our sight.'

"I had never yet said anything to her about marriage—for the time to come at that had never seemed to arrive; but there's nothing like a little excitement to bring things to a focus. You've seen water in a

tumbler just at the freezing-point, but not exactly able to make up its mind to freeze, when a little jar will set the crystals forming, and in a minute what was liquid is ice. It was the shock of events that night that touched my life into crystals—not of ice, gentlemen, by any manner of means.

"After the fire had got along so far that the meeting-house was a gone case, an alarm was given, probably by the very fellows that set it, and a hundred people were on the spot before the thing had done burning.

"Of course these circumstances put an end to the breaking up of the family. Dave was sent for, and came home. Then, as soon as we saw that the old man's brain was injured so that he wasn't likely to recover his mind, the boys and I went to work and put that farm through a course of improvement it would have done your eyes good to see. The children were sent to school, and Mrs. Jedwort had all the money she wanted now to clothe them, and to provide the house with comforts, without stealing her own butter. Jedwort was a burden; but, in spite of him, that was just about the happiest family, for the next four years, that ever lived on this planet.

"Jedwort soon got his bodily health, but I don't think he knew one of us again after his hurt. As near as I could get at his state of mind, he thought he had been changed into some sort of animal. He seemed inclined to take me for a master, and for four years he followed me around like a dog. During that time he never spoke, but only whined and growled.

When I said, 'Lie down,' he'd lie down; and when I whistled he'd come.

"I used sometimes to make him work; and certain simple things he would do very well, as long as I was by. One day I had a jag of hay to get in; and, as the boys were away, I thought I'd have him load it. I pitched it on to the wagon about where it ought to lie, and looked to him only to pack it down. There turned out to be a bigger load than I had expected, and the higher it got, the worse the shape of it, till finally, as I was starting it toward the barn, off it rolled, and the old man with it, head foremost.

"He struck a stone heap, and for a moment I thought he was killed. But he jumped up and spoke for the first time. *'I'll blow it,'* says he, finishing the sentence he had begun four years before, when he called for the horn to be passed up to him.

"I couldn't have been much more astonished if one of the horses had spoken. But I saw at once that there was an expression in Jedwort's face that hadn't been there since his tumble in the belfry; and I knew that, as his wits had been knocked out of him by one blow on the head, so another blow had knocked 'em in again.

" 'Where's Bob?' says he, looking all round.

" 'Bob?' says I, not thinking at first who he meant. Oh, Bob is dead—he has been dead these three years.'

"Without noticing my reply, he exclaimed: 'Where did all that hay come from? Where's the old meetin'-house?'

" 'Don't you know?' says I. 'Some rogues set fire to it the night after you got hurt, and burnt it up.'

"He seemed then just beginning to realize that something extraordinary had happened.

"'Stark,' says he, 'what's the matter with ye? You're changed.'

"'Yes,' say I, 'I wear my beard now, and I've grown older!'

"'Dumbed if 'ta'n't odd!' says he. 'Stark, what in thunder's the matter with *me?*'

"'You've had meeting-house on the brain for the past four years,' says I; 'that's what's the matter.'

"It was some time before I could make him understand that he had been out of his head, and that so long a time had been a blank to him.

"Then he said, 'Is this my farm?'

"'Don't you know it?' says I.

"'It looks more slicked up than ever it used to,' says he.

"'Yes,' says I; 'and you'll find everything else on the place slicked up in about the same way.'

"'Where's Dave?' says he.

"'Dave has gone to town to see about selling the wool.'

"'Where's Dan?'

"'Dan's in college. He takes a great notion to medicine; and we're going to make a doctor of him.'

"'Whose house is that?' says he, as I was taking him home.

"'No wonder you don't know it,' says I. 'It has been painted, and shingled, and had new blinds put on; the gates and fences are all in prime condition; and that's a new barn we put up a couple of years ago.'

"'Where does the money come from, to make all these improvements?'

"'It comes off the place,' says I. 'We haven't run in debt the first cent for anything, but we've made the farm more profitable than it ever was before.'

"'That *my* house?' he repeated wonderingly, as we approached it. 'What sound is that?'

"'That's Lottie practicing her lesson on the piano.'

"'A pianer in my house?' he muttered. 'I can't stand that!' He listened. 'It sounds pooty, though!'

"'Yes, it does sound pretty, and I guess you'll like it. How does the place suit you?'

"'It *looks* pooty.' He started. 'What young lady is that?'

"It was Lottie, who had left her music and stood by the window.

"'My dahter! ye don't say! Dumbed if she a'n't a mighty nice gal.'

"'Yes,' says I; 'she takes after her mother.'

"Just then Susie, who heard talking, ran to the door.

"'Who's that agin?' says Jedwort.

"I told him.

"'Wal, *she's* a mighty nice-lookin' gal!'

"'Yes,' says I, *she* takes after her mother.'

"Little Willie, now eight years old, came out of the woodshed with a bow-and-arrow in his hand, and stared like an owl, hearing his father talk.

"'What boy is that?' says Jedwort. And when I told him, he muttered, 'He's an ugly-looking brat!'

"'He's more like his father,' says I.

"The truth is, Willie was such a fine boy the old man was afraid to praise him, for fear I'd say of him, as I'd said of the girls, that he favored his mother.

"Susie ran back and gave the alarm; and then out came mother, and Maria with her baby in her arms, for I forgot to tell you that we had been married now nigh on to two years.

"Well, the women folks were as much astonished as I had been when Jedwort first spoke, and a good deal more delighted. They drew him into the house; and I am bound to say he behaved remarkably well. He kept looking at his wife, and his children, and his grandchild, and the new paper on the walls, and the new furniture, and now and then asking a question or making a remark.

" 'It all comes back to me now,' says he at last. 'I thought I was living in the moon, with a superior race of human bein's; and this is the place, and you are the people.'

"It wasn't more than a couple of days before he began to pry around, and find fault, and grumble at the expense; and I saw there was danger of things relapsing into something like their former condition. So I took him one side, and talked to him.

" 'Jedwort,' says I, 'you're like a man raised from the grave. You was the same as buried to your neighbors, and now they come and look at you as they would at a dead man come to life. To you, it's like coming into a new world, and I'll leave it to you now, if you don't rather like the change from the old state of things to what you see around you to-day. You've

seen how the family affairs go on—how pleasant everything is, and how we all enjoy ourselves. You hear the piano, and like it; you see your children sought after and respected, your wife in finer health and spirits than you've ever known her since the day she was married; you see industry and neatness everywhere on the premises; and you're a beast if you don't like all that. In short, you see that our management is a great deal better than yours; and that we beat you even in the matter of economy. Now, what I want to know is this: whether you think you'd like to fall into our way of living, or return like a hog to your wallow.'

" 'I don't say but what I like your way of livin' very well,' he grumbled.

" 'Then,' says I, 'you must just let us go ahead, as we have been going ahead. Now's the time for you to turn about and be a respectable man, like your neighbors. Just own up, and say you've not only been out of your head the past four years, but that you've been more or less out of your head the last four-and-twenty years. But say you're in your right mind now, and prove it by acting like a man in his right mind. Do that, and I'm with you; we're all with you. But go back to your old dirty ways, and you go alone. Now I sha'n't let you off till you tell me what you mean to do.'

"He hesitated some time, then said, 'Maybe you're about right, Stark; you and Dave and the old woman seem to be doin' pooty well, and I guess I'll let you go on.' "

Here my friend paused, as if his story was done;

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when one of the villagers asked, "About the land where the old meetin'-house stood—what ever was done with that?"

"That was appropriated for a new schoolhouse; and there my little shavers go to school."

"And old Jedwort, is he alive yet?"

"Both Jedwort and his wife have gone to that country where meanness and dishonesty have a mighty poor chance—where the only investments worth much are those recorded in the Book of Life. Mrs. Jedwort was rich in that kind of stock; and Jedwort's account, I guess, will compare favorably with that of some respectable people, such as we all know. I tell ye, my friends," continued my fellow-traveler, "there's many a man, both in the higher and lower ranks of life, that 't would do a deal of good, say nothing of the mercy 'twould be to their families, just to knock 'em on the head, and make Nebuchadnezzars of 'em—then, after they'd been turned out to grass a few years, let 'em come back again, and see how happy folks have been, and how well they have got along without 'em.

"I carry on the old place now," he added. "The younger girls are married off; Dan's a doctor in the North Village; and as for Dave, he and I have struck ile. I'm going out to look at our property now."

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